

THE QUEEN'S NECKLACE

By ELLEN LEYS

"Lady of quality requires as companion a woman not under thirty years of age. She must be accomplished and conversant with all the good society. As Lady Alicia Sowerby, The Towers, Myton, near Tadcaster, Yorkshire."

I saw this advertisement the day after the funeral of the dear old aunt with whom I had lived since childhood. Her death had thrown me homeless and penniless upon the world, and for the last few days I had earned with anxious eyes the employment columns of the newspapers. This was the only sort of occupation for which I was in the least bit fitted. I held no diplomas, and had had no experience in teaching, so I could not offer myself as a governess. But I was certainly a gentlewoman. I had just reached thirty; I could paint and sing and speak modern languages, and the society to which I had been accustomed was undoubtedly "good."

So I wrote my application and occupied the time in waiting in imagining what Lady Alicia might be like. Sliff, old-world, evidently, with her "lady of quality" and her "gentlewoman," but I hoped she might be one of the dear old ladies one dreams of, dressing in gray silk and old lace, with a faint perfume of lavender about her person and her house. I pictured her to myself with a sweet, reposeful face, and longed to hear that her home might be mine.

Lady Alicia's reply dispelled some of these illusions. She approved of me, my references were "satisfactory," and she offered me an "honorarium" of £30 a year, but the handwriting was that of a masterful woman, and the phrasing of her letter gave no indication of gentleness. However, I thankfully accepted the post, and before a week had passed found myself one July afternoon at Myton station.

The train went on, and I stood, solitary, on the platform, waiting until the porter came for my ticket that I might ask him how to get to the Towers. Before he had time to stroll up to me in the leisurely manner of the country, a dog-cart came racing down the road, a groom sprang to the horse's head, and a bright light Scotch terrier dashed into the station, ran up to me, and began sniffing at my skirts. It was quickly followed by the driver of the trap, a tall boy of about fifteen, with frank, blue eyes that opened wide with astonishment as he caught sight of me.

"Down Connas, down!" he shouted to the dog, raising his hat apologetically. Then, as his eyes took in the appearance of the platform, they rested again inquiringly on me, and he cried: "I say, you're never—I mean are you Miss Marshall?"

"Yes, for the Towers."

"I've come to meet you. Awfully sorry I'm so late. Will you come this way? Good!"

This was admiration for the way in which I mounted to the high seat, and he showed that I had been my way into his good graces by talking to me in a friendly and easy strain during the drive.

As we came to the top of a hill about two miles from the station he pointed with his whip to a large, red brick mansion embosomed in the trees of an extensive park and said:

"That's the Towers."

"It seems to be a large place," I said.

"Yes, beauty, ugly. Old Sowerby—that's Aunt Alicia's late husband—had a pile of money—made it in trade—sugar, or starch, or something of that kind. Thought he'd scored, I expect, when he got an earl's daughter to marry him. Ha! ha! Soon found out who was master!"

"You are Lady Alicia's nephew, then?"

"Yes—Max Hetherington. My father is the younger brother. My uncle is the Earl of Ulswater. I spend the summer vacation here, and the rest of the year I go to school. He has a fellow down for a few weeks. Fred Somers is coming the first week of August."

"May I ask a question?"

"Certainly—any number."

"Why did you look so astonished when you saw me?"

"Oh, I say," he began, as he broke into a laugh. "Well, I said you might, and it is rather a joke. The truth is, aunt is expecting a sort of frump—some grizzled, scraggy old maid, dressed in a weather-beaten frock. And when I saw you, so young-looking, and smart, and trim—well, you see, it was rather a surprise!"

"I see," and I laughed too.

"I'm afraid she'll consider you a fraud," he said, eyeing me critically.

"But I am only what I professed to be," she said you were thirty."

"Quite true."

"Well, you look about twenty-four. And she expected somebody—well, plain. But I'm awfully glad you are what you are. I see you won't be a sneak like the last one. And, look here, I promise to stand your friend through thick and thin. Done!"

He extended his big, sun-burnt hand, and I put mine into it to get it nearly squeezed into a pulp.

"And Connas will be your friend, too," he added. "He's an awfully knowing little beast, and he made up to you at once."

We had reached the lodge gates now, and a few minutes later the dog-cart drew up in front of the house. Max threw the reins to the groom, helped me to alight, and I was ushered at once into the presence.

Lady Alicia raised her long-handled eyeglasses and stared at me through it. She was a tall, big woman of forty, with a high color, and a voice like a man's. In a few short, clear sentences, she told me what my duties were to be, and intimated that I could enter upon them as soon as I had removed my hat and cape.

I found that my post would be a busy one. I was secretary, almoner and a sort of confidential upper servant all in one. Lady Alicia's correspondence was immense. She would dictate letters to me by the dozen and never seem weary. She was far too independent to have a regular lady's maid.

"I do my own hair and put on my own clothes," she said; but I was required to superintend the sewing maid who made renovations in her ladyship's gowns, and to put finishing touches to the millinery sent her from Tadcaster.

Two or three times a week I had to go to the village as Lady Alicia's representative, to visit the sick, read to the aged, and distribute occasional doses of tea and money to the deserving poor.

The time fixed for these visits was that during which morning service was being held in the church, and the reason for this was suggested by a remark of Max's.

"I suppose she's afraid of your fascinating the vicar. He's a widower, and the last one set her cap at him. But as long as he's single, aunt can do as she likes with him."

I had no desire to fascinate the vicar, but he was always very kind to me when we did meet, and very attentive to any recommendations I made him on behalf of the poor people, and sometimes when he happened to be coming out of church as I was on my homeward journey, he would walk a part of the way with me, carrying my basket. He was a gentle, brave man, tall and thin. He had one little girl a sweet child, who was fond of coming to meet me when I was on my rounds—a lovely, little thing. Sometimes Lady Alicia invited her to luncheon at the Tow-

ers, but Max was too rough for her, and she preferred to sit beside me in the old summer-house with a book to playing tennis with him.

My post, though a very busy one, would not have been unpleasant but for the coldness with which Lady Alicia treated me. It seemed to me that while she approved of all that I did for her, she disliked me personally. No trace of cordiality ever colored her accents when addressing me. At the end of six weeks I was as far apart from her as on the day of my arrival. Max, as usual, noticed and commented upon this.

"Truth is, you're far too nice looking, Miss Marshall. Aunt sees that people look at you because you're so pretty. You're just her opposite, too, dark and slight. I heard her say to Lady Masterton that one never knew if she could trust dark people!"

In his rough, boyish way Max did all he could to make up to me for his aunt's coldness. He called me a "good chum," read me the jokes out of his boys' papers when I was sitting over some sewing of Lady Alicia's in the summer house, and when I could be spared, took me for a row on the lake in the park.

So things went on until his friend, Fred Somers, came. Somers was as wild as Max. Indeed, he thought he epitomized most of the mischief that was done after he came. It was he who egged Max on to climb the ruined tower in search of starlings' nests; who made him ride bare-backed on an unbroken colt at the risk of his life; who suggested upsetting the boat with their clothes in it when they went for a swim in the lake, and diving for the watches which they had left in their vest pockets and which, needless to say, they never recovered.

However, all these amusements palled in time, and one day I came upon the boys in the hall in deep consultation.

"Plotting fresh mischief?" I said.

"No mischief at all, Miss Inquisitive! I want to see Aunt Alicia. Where is she?"

And I saw from his manner that he was not very sure of his courage carrying him all the way he wanted to go now.

In which Lady Alicia, disabled by an attack of rheumatism, used to spend the day at that time, while Somers said to me:

"We want to go to the races."

"We won't get leave to do that," I answered.

"Why not?"

"Lady Alicia strongly disapproves of horse racing."

"Just like a woman," and Somers turned away and began teasing Connas.

Max was gone quite a long time, and came back at last, looking very wrathful and very red in the face.

"Won't let us," he said.

"You shouldn't have asked," said Somers.

"We should have taken French leave, and heard what she had to say when we came back."

"That wouldn't work," said Max, whose parents had impressed upon him the necessity of remembering that he was his aunt's heir.

"Well," yawned Somers, "there's nothing to do. It's awfully stale."

"Awfully stale," echoed Max. "Thank goodness, term begins the day after tomorrow!"

Just then a footman came with a message from his mistress.

"Her ladyship says that if Mr. Hetherington and Mr. Somers will come to the blue drawing room, she will ask Miss Marshall to bring down the jewels which she promised to show them."

"Stuff! Who wants to see jewels?" cried Max. "Does she think we're girls?"

"Looks like it," sneered Somers.

"Lady Alicia has some very rare gems, I believe," said I, and I led the way, while they hung back a moment and then followed.

Lady Alicia looked up from her reading.

"I am sure you must both have sense enough," she said, addressing the boys, "to see that the race course at Tadcaster is not quite the place for boys of your age. There's no need to look so glum, Maxwell. You have brought about your own disappointment by allowing yourselves to imagine such a thing possible. I wish to compensate you, however, for any chagrin you may feel, and you will find that you can pass an hour as happily among my treasures as upon the turf. I trust, Miss Marshall, will you bring the inlaid cabinet from my dressing room?"

I brought the cabinet—a beautiful little chest of Eastern workmanship. I had often heard Lady Alicia's collection spoken of, and was eager to have an opportunity of seeing it. Lady Alicia opened the cabinet with a tiny gold key she wore on her watch-chain.

One half of the cabinet was fitted with little drawers; the other half with shelves only. From each drawer in turn she drew forth jewels which she wore on great occasions. They were remarkably fine, and the display of necklaces, bracelets, brooches, rings and ornaments for the hair was such as to make most women's hearts ache with envy.

But it was when Lady Alicia began to exhibit her historic gems that the interest came for me, for her collection of these treasures was unique. Two tiny diamond shoe-buckles grudgingly bestowed by Queen Elizabeth on a maid-of-honor; a snuff-box of Charles II, a sapphire pin worn by Prince Charlie, and given by him to an ancestor of Lady Alicia's in acknowledgment of safe hiding; a ring which she had worn as a ring worn by Montrose, and other relics, to each of which was attached some romantic story,

were brought out in turn. But the treasure most valued by Lady Alicia was contained in a small sandal-wood box which lay in solitary state upon the lowest shelf. She lifted the lid and showed us, resting on the blue velvet lining, a beautiful pearl necklace which Marie Antoinette had worn in her happier days, and which she had bestowed on the daughter of the then Earl of Ulswater when she left Versailles with her parents before the days of the Terror.

It was a most lovely object itself, and its value was, of course, greatly enhanced by its associations.

Every detail of that unhappy Queen's life has always had an absorbing interest for me, and I begged to be allowed to hold the necklace for a moment. I suppose my face, rather than my voice, betrayed what I was feeling, for Max exclaimed, sharply:

"Well, you are gone on that!" and started me into flushing crimson at the notice he attracted to me. At the same time he caught up the sandalwood box and smelt it, then, like the dog he was, he put it to Connas's nose, saying:

"Smell, Connas, smell!"

Lady Alicia reproved him as he deserved in sharp tones, and putting out her hand to me for the necklace, said:

"That gem is worth more to me than all my other possessions!"

I gave it back in silence, not trusting myself to speak, and turned away to hide some foolish tears which the touching of that relic had drawn to my eyes. A companion had no business to be sentimental!

When I looked around again the box was restored to its place, and Lady Alicia was exhibiting an object more interesting to the boys, a silver horn used by the Elector of Saxony when out hunting. She put this back and closed the door of the cabinet.

"Our ancestors must have done a rare lot of cringing to get all these pickings," said Max, in his elegant way, with a wink at me. Before his aunt could reply the vicar was announced, and when we had all shaken hands, Lady Alicia locked the cabinet, and asked me to put it away, at the same time dismissing the boys, who came tumbling over each other into the hall, vainly trying to smother a laugh.

Two days after this Max and Somers went back to school, Max's last words to me being a recommendation of Connas to my special tenderness during his absence.

The dog had grown very fond of me, and followed me about continually. His devotion took the edge a little of the loneliness I felt when Max was gone, but I fancied that Lady Alicia grudged me even this bit of comfort, and often when I called to Connas to join me on my walk she would insist on detaining him at her side, for her attack of rheumatism still kept her a prisoner.

"The boys had been gone about a fortnight when the vicar called one afternoon, bringing with him a French lady, a connection of his late wife. I had been sitting reading to Lady Alicia, and was about to go quietly away (having been given to understand that my presence was not required when visitors arrived), when the vicar asked Lady Alicia if she would have the kindness to show Madame Lacroix the Marie Antoinette necklace—she had been so much interested when he told her about it. After bringing the cabinet I was about to leave the room, but I had hardly reached the door when Lady Alicia gave a cry and screamed out:

"It's gone! The necklace is gone! The box has been stolen!" Then, forgetting her rheumatism, she rushed across the room, laid her hands roughly on my shoulder, and cried: "Where is it? Quick—quick! You know all about it!"

The suddenness of her attack stupefied me. I crimsoned with indignation, and stammered out:

"Lady Alicia! What can you mean? What have I to do with it?"

"Everything! You appeared to covet it so much when you saw it—Maxwell noticed it. You brought it to me last night, you put it back—you brought it to me again to-day!"

"My dear Lady Alicia," said the vicar, in his quiet voice, "pray calm yourself. You have not yet seen whether any of your other jewels are missing." And he led her back to her couch. I waited, anxious to be gone, but the thought that any movement to leave would be construed into a desire to escape, kept me rooted to the spot.

Lady Alicia counted over all her possessions—nothing else was missing. The French lady sat with her cold eyes fixed on me.

The vicar said: "It is very strange. If your cabinet has been robbed, why should that only have been taken?"

"Oh, that's easy to see," replied Lady Alicia, in her hard, deep voice. "It would not be missed for a long time in the ordinary course of things, for I seldom show the necklace—it is too sacred. At any rate, the mystery will soon be solved," she added, and going to her writing table she filled up a telegraph form.

"May I trouble you to leave this at the postoffice for me as you go home?" she said, handing it to the vicar. "I shall allow no member of the household to go out of these gates until the necklace has been found."

The telegram, as I guessed, was to Scotland Yard, and at breakfast-time next morning a detective named Duckworth arrived. He had traveled by the night train and lost no time in beginning his investigations.

My position, from the moment the necklace was missed, was one of the utmost misery. Lady Alicia made no attempt to conceal that she suspected me of being the thief. The detective, a smooth-faced, smooth-tongued man, with hideously oily manners, examined and cross-examined me in the presence of Lady Alicia. All the circumstances under which the jewels had been brought out and shown to the boys were described and discussed at nauseam. The fact that the cabinet bore no sign of having been broken open and of Lady Alicia having the keys always on her watch-chain, appeared to have no significance for either Lady Alicia or the

man from Scotland Yard. The questions asked me by the detective showed me what was in their minds—Lady Alicia, drowsy from her illness, had fallen asleep; I had taken the key, stolen the necklace, thinking it would not be missed for a long time, and quietly packed for the key! The fact of my having asked for a day's holiday at the end of the week was made much of. I suppose they thought I meant to get away and sell it!

For the next few days I was seldom out of sight of the detective. He would sit down beside me when I was sewing and appear to take a great interest in my work. He would join me in the garden if I went for a stroll. Even my favorite retreat, the summer house, was not free from his intrusion. I could see that the very servants knew on whom suspicion rested, but I could not attempt to leave, for I knew that my doing so would be construed into an acknowledgment of guilt, and that Lady Alicia would not have hesitated to have me arrested.

For some time I could not understand the detective's attitude towards me. Why so suave, so insinuating? Suddenly an expression in his eyes, accompanied by some familiar phrase, showed me his meaning. The man had the insolence to be attempting to make love to me!

He saw that I had divined his intention, and broke out:

"My dear young lady, I see that you have read my secret as I have discovered yours! Yes—your beauty, your helplessness, have made the deepest impression on my heart. Even detectives have hearts, strange as it may seem to you! I offer you the protection of my love. Marry me, my sweetest one, and you shall never again hear a whisper of this suspicion!"

"Mr. Duckworth!" I rose, trembling with indignation.

"Calm yourself," he said, looking around. "Do not expose yourself to observation. My dear, do you not see that I know all! Your fate is in my hands. Accept my proposal, and you will be a free woman. Refuse it, and you will be arrested before a week is out."

"And you?" I cried in scorn, "you would marry a woman you believe to be a thief?"

He answered with an odious smile. "Not any such woman."

I am not by nature a passionate woman, but the insolence of the man's manner, and his calm assumption of my guilt, roused my temper beyond control, and I threatened to go at once to Lady Alicia and expose him.

He smiled contemptuously. "Do!" he cried. "And hear what her ladyship will say. Everybody sees how fond she is of you—she will take all you say for gospel! I fancy I can hear her—'The clever little mix, thinking to turn the detective from his duty by a glance of her dark eyes.' Oh, yes, Miss Marshall, it will be quite your crowning success to go with such a story to Lady Alicia!"

It was too true. I was no coward, but I knew that he was right.

"You know that I am as innocent of this thing as you are yourself," I cried.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I might have said so a day or two ago," he said, meaningly, and I remembered that he had come out to the garden and cunningly made him ten times more unpleasant than he had been before.

"You prefer to take your fate in your own hands, then?" he said, drawing nearer. "Remember, I am willing, nay, anxious, to relieve you from the unpleasantness of your position. Trust me, put yourself into my hands by accepting me as your affianced husband!"

I drew back in horror as he put out his hands to me, and seeing the loathing in my eyes, he broke off:

"Very well, you have chosen. Henceforth I am your enemy, not your friend and ally."

I went away and took refuge in my bedroom for the rest of the day. Lady Alicia, now herself again, had gone to a garden party and had left Duckworth to keep guard over me.

Next morning the detective, after a long conference with Lady Alicia, went out. I saw him being driven away in the dog-cart and feeling thankful for some hours of freedom from this unceasing watchfulness, I betook myself to the summer house, accompanied by Connas.

No sooner had we entered our refuge than the dog became greatly excited. The end of an Egyptian cigarette was lying on the floor, and at first I thought it was this that had excited Connas, for Mr. Duckworth smoked these cigarettes, and the dog had always shown a marked antipathy for the detective. But it was not the cigarette, for he began to sniff at the floor on the other side of the summer house at a place where the wooden casing that formed a sort of wainscoting was broken away a few inches above the floor, and, showing his paws as far as he could get them under the woodwork, he whined and growled as he might have done if he had smelt a rat.

I thought for a moment that this was the monster of the household, and, stepping down, saw a small object lying beyond my reach. Suddenly a wild thought struck me. Could there be any undreamt-of chance, could there be here any clue to the mystery of the necklace? I remembered how Max had made the dog smell the box. I looked out into the garden, and there I saw the vicar on his way from the house, where he had been for the last hour with Lady Alicia. In my excitement I ran up to him and told him of my thought.

He came with me into the summerhouse, and said he thought the object I pointed out might prove to be the sandal-wood box.

"If it should be that, it would be advisable to have Lady Alicia present at its finding," he said, and he went without my asking him, but his kindness of his heart, to bring her himself.

She came, looking very incredulous, but the vicar, stooping down, pushed the hooked end of his stick into the recess, and brought out the box. He put it into Lady Alicia's hands, and I watched her eagerly as she opened the box. As she did so she broke into a harsh laugh.

"I thought so—it is, of course, empty!"

"Empty!" The vicar and I made the exclamation at the same moment. She turned away after casting one searching glance at me, and said:

"We shall see what Mr. Duckworth says to this."

Taking the vicar's arm she moved slowly away, and I heard her say in her deep, harsh voice:

"Of course, Mr. Duckworth will agree with me that she put it there herself, but it is of no use to charge her, as she would be too cunning to put the necklace in her trunk. There's nothing for it but to wait until she is off her guard."

The vicar's answer annoyed her. "I feel sure, as I told you before, that you are doing Miss Marshall a great injustice. I am persuaded that she is perfectly innocent."

Upon which Lady Alicia withdrew her hand from his arm and bade him an icy good-morning.

Left alone, I sat thinking, thinking, vainly endeavoring to find some explanation of the matter, for this discovery seemed to make it more mysterious than ever. After a while I rose and went into the shrubbery.

Suddenly I heard my name called ("cheer up") would not convey the remotest idea of the noise, and, to my astonishment, saw Max running toward me at full speed.

"Maxwell broken out," he cried. "Some-

duffer had it directly he came back and lots of the fellows have taken it, so old Humphreys has closed the school until the half term. Jolly good for me, if only the pater and mater hadn't started on their cruise. As it is, I shall have to put up with being in this dull hole for the present. By the way, I say, has auntie missed the necklace yet?"

"Missed the necklace?" I cried. "It has been stolen and I— But what do you know about it? We have had a detective here for the last week trying to discover the thief."

He burst into a roar of laughter. "Great Scott! You don't say so! What a stunning joke! How Somers will laugh! Well, I'm awfully glad. Served her out better than I hoped."

"Do you know where it is, then?" I exclaimed, my voice trembling with excitement.

"Yes, I hid it to pay her out for not letting us go to the races. But, I say, what makes you look like that?"

"She thinks I have stolen it!" I could not restrain a sob as I said the words, and Max, suddenly realizing the mischief he had done, seized my arm and pulled me along towards the house, saying:

"I'll soon set that right!"

He went at once to the blue drawing room, and, going to a large cabinet filled with rare old china, took off the lid of a pot pourri jar, and plunged his hand among the dead rose leaves. But he rummaged in vain, and even his ruddy face grew a shade paler as, after emptying the contents of the jar upon the table, no sign of the necklace was to be found.

"Gone! By all the powers!" he cried.

"Are you sure you put it there? Oh, think, Max, think!" I cried in agony.

"Here and nowhere else," he cried. "I caught it as I was just as she was shaking hands with the vicar. I tipped Somers a wink, and he hid the lid of the jar, and I dropped it in and gave it a push in among the stuff in the jar. You weren't looking, fortunately, or you would have spoilt our little game. Then, you know, she just turned the key and asked you to take the cabinet away."

"But where can it be now?"

"Ah! That's what we've got to find out! Has the 'tee' searched this room?"

"Thoroughly."

"Anybody when he was doing it?" asked Max, carelessly.

"No—at least, I believe not."

"Tell me all you can about the way things have been done."

I told him all that had taken place—the missing of the necklace, the finding of the box, even to the detective's proposals to myself, for, boy as he was, I had often noticed a shrewdness in Max that made me hope he might really be of use in clearing up the mystery.

"Who's that strolling about out there?" he cried, all at once. "Why, if it isn't old Tibbits, the constable. What's he here for?"

"I suppose he has been sent for to watch over me," I said, bitterly. "Mr. Duckworth is away at Tadcaster, and Lady Alicia has gone out to luncheon at Lady Masterton's."

"Good! Tibbits is a friend of mine. Now's our chance."

And Max was off in a moment, and was soon talking as hard as he could to the policeman. Tibbits appeared at first to be resisting some suggestion of the boys, but the upshot of it was that Max and he came into the house and went upstairs. Ten minutes had not passed before the door reappeared, Max, with beaming face, holding out the necklace in triumph.

"Max! Where did you find it?"

"Just where I expected," he said. "In the 'tee's' own bag. I guessed from what you said that he had found the necklace himself. You see, he had the coat quite clear. I'm only thankful he was fool enough to leave it behind to-day, instead of taking it with him. We searched first in his pockets, and the thing that struck us as odd at once was that we found his shaving-stick loose in his jacket pocket. 'Odd place that for a shaving-stick,' said I, 'where's the box?' Couldn't find it anywhere about the room, so we took the liberty of opening the gentleman's portmanteau. Down in one corner, hidden away in a rolled-up sock, was the shaving-stick case, and in the box was the necklace!"

"You are a clever boy, Max," I said.

"Yes, my talents are quite thrown away in the fifth form," he said, calmly. "Think I'd better join the force, hadn't I, Tibbits?"

"You would, indeed, be a ornament to it, sir," said Tibbits, in tones of deep respect.

Max took care that the vicar should be at the house when Lady Alicia returned. Duckworth appeared at the same moment, and Max went out into the hall to meet his aunt.

"I'll tell you how I came to be here afterward," he said in answer to her exclamation of surprise. "I want you to come into the blue-room. And you," he